

Smiles AND Tears

**ON COMPLETING 50 YEARS IN SHOWBIZ, CHARACTER ACTRESS
SHAMMI TELLS IT THE WAY IT IS... AND THE WAY IT WAS**

I can't believe the fact that I've been around for 50 years. I signed my first contract in 1949. What do you mean, I must have been just a child then? *Kya baat kar rahen hai aap! Mujhe bilkul bachi bana rahen hain.* I turned 70 years-old this April.

Ustad Pedro was the first film I signed. It was directed by Tara Harish for Shaikh Mukhtar's company, Omar Khayyam Films. He also directed *Malhar* which was produced by Mukesh, the singer. Shaikh Mukhtar gave me the permission to do *Malhar*. Tara Babu was a partner in Omar Khayyam Films, so there was no problem really.

Contracts used to be extremely stringent those days. Other film-makers shied away, I lost out on quite a few assignments. But then you win some, lose some. Right?

Though I'm known essentially as a supporting actress, I was the heroine in my first two films. *Ustad Pedro* had two heroes and heroines but in *Malhar* I was the solo heroine opposite a newcomer called Arjun Bakshi. That was his screen name and mine was Shammi.

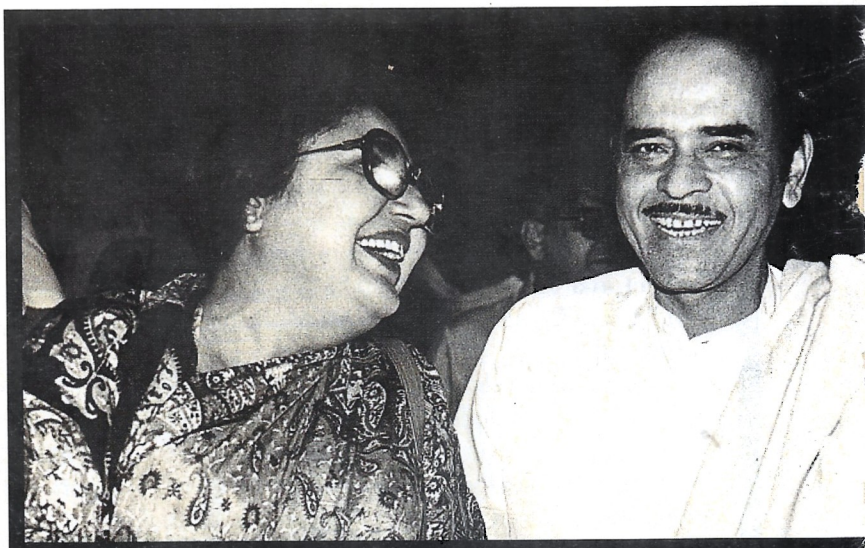
My real name is Nargis. Though my friends still call me Nargis, the film industry knows me as Shammi. Come to think of it, Raj Kapoor would call me Nargis. You can imagine why he liked to call me that.

Actually, I wasn't meant to be in the

movies. I belong to a Parsi family of priests, which discouraged girls from working. My father was a priest, he passed away when I was only two. My family couldn't imagine one of its daughters in the movies. But I was adamant.

Mehboob Khan's assistant was a family friend. He asked me one day, "Films mein kaam karegi?" I defiantly answered back, "Haan, karegi". So my movie career started as a joke. Earlier, my elder sister (dress designer Mani Rabadi) had worked in a couple of Gujarati films. That's why I could boldly inform my family about my career plan.

On my way to meet Shaikh Mukhtar, I met with an accident. It was raining, I slipped and fell



With Sultan Ahmed

FLASHBACK



while crossing the road. Fortunately, no bones were broken. I still remember my white sari splashed with mud. My hair was dishevelled, my raincoat was torn. "How can you meet Shaikh Mukhtar *saab* in this condition?" wailed the family friend. But I was determined. "He's going to look at me, not my sari," I argued back, pulling the poor man along.

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Mukhtar wanted to know what had happened to me. He then asked if I could speak Hindi. I said I could manage. Though we didn't speak Hindi at home, my sister Mani was a part of IPTA. I used to accompany her quite often to the Royal Opera House theatre where distinguished actors like Prithviraj Kapoor, Balraj Sahni, Kaifi and Shaukat Azmi would rehearse in fluent Hindustani.

Next day, director Tara Babu scrutinised me. I was given the okay! I was given lines of dialogue to read aloud. *Malhar* was based on Emile Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Later, the same story was made twice unsuccessfully with Dilip Kumar *saab* in the lead, once as *Arzoo* and then as *Dil Diya Dard Liya*. It was no surprise that *Malhar* flopped. But the songs by Roshan were super-hits. The evergreen *Bade armanon se rakha hai* was picturised on me.

My career as an actress didn't take off. I was *Anari No.1* then, I didn't know how to deal with film people. Once *Malhar* flopped, I was shunned. Even those who wanted to sign me, stayed away because they didn't want to negotiate with Shaikh Mukhtar. I had offers from the likes of Sayten Bose and M. Sadiq, but I just sat at home, twiddling my thumbs.

To date, I've never begged for work. During my early years, I did semi-successful films like *Khoj* in which I co-starred with Mahipal. That did okay business. *Khoj* was directed by Nanabhai Bhatt's brother, Balwant Bhatt. I also did a few supporting roles, as in R.C. Talwar's *Sangdil*. But after that my mind is a blank. I just did whatever role came my way.

In 1955, M. Sadiq asked me if I was interested in doing *Musafirkhana*, a comedy role with Johnny Walker and Om Prakash. I didn't mind doing any role. *Musafirkhana* became a hit and I was

inundated with funny roles. I went along with the flow, which was a blessing in disguise. I'm still around because I can play any character, from the comic to the vampish roles.

I was and continue to be very friendly with quite a few heroines, especially Nargis, Nanda, Waheeda Rehman, Jaya Bachchan and Asha Parekh. I laugh a lot and I suppose I make these heroines laugh as well. I've never had any airs because I've never been a star. Heroines haven't felt threatened by me.

I was a pucca tomboy. So both the heroines and the heroes were my chums. No one thought of me as a woman. Nowadays when people see my old films on television, they tell me I looked beautiful in *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parayi* and *Malhar*. Why didn't anyone say such things to me when I was young? Looking at the brighter side of being a tomboy, no one took advantage of me in *that* way.

Yeah, I did get married eventually at a very late age. Everyone kept coaxing me to get hitched. I was almost 50 when I married film-maker Sultan Ahmed. I can't say it was a mistake. Because I was no sweet-16 who was swept off her feet.

I think he had a major complex about the fact that I was a little older than him. So he thought he could get away with anything. He thought at my age, I would have nowhere to go when he re-married a much younger woman.

I was lucky to get back on my feet after such a setback. I left Sultan Ahmed's house in the middle of the night, and headed for Nargis Dutt's place. She was groggy, she scolded me for leaving my home.

I proceeded to my sister's place. She too was hugely shocked. I sat at home for eight days. Then producer-director Dulal Guha offered me a role. To be honest, no one in the film industry came forward to help me. By this time Sultan *saab* was a big influential producer and was probably feared. Manoj Kumar, in whose *Purab Aur Paschim* I'd done a great role, offered me a part in *Kranti*. He calls me *Badi Maa*.

I'd done *Purab Aur Paschim* before my marriage. It's one of my favourite roles. There I was smoking and drinking away to glory. I was such a fool I

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didn't even know how to hold a cigarette. I thought I'd practise at home. When my mother saw me roaming around the house, holding a cigarette, she was furious. She was shocked that I'd accepted a film in which I would have to smoke. Saira Banu helped me with the cigarette. She didn't smoke in real life but she was definitely better than me with the cigarette.

Yeah, those were the days all right. I remember how I met Nargis' mother (Jaddan Bai) for the first time. She had a foul tongue but I soon got used to it.



She called me to her place for a concert.

That's when I met Baby (Nargis) for the first time. I think we were on the same wavelength. Nargis and I hit it off together immediately. We used to do a lot of charity shows, we'd travel together. We were both very fond of reading. She could afford hardbound books and lent them to me. At times in life, one meets a soul-sister. We enjoyed the same books, movies, gossip, everything. I remained good friends with her right till her end. I was with her throughout her stormy life.

Her death was a big blow to me. Because of my jovial personality, no one thought I'd be so affected by her death. But I was deeply upset. Even today I think of her practically every day. I remember the things we did together. We laughed a lot, people would come and ask me what we found so funny.

I can't claim to have been friends with

Madhubala. The atmosphere in her house was forbidding. I remember visiting her when she was very ill. Her father told me he didn't like visitors since they only come to see the *tamasha*. I left without meeting Madhubala...

I was very friendly with Meena Kumari though. She was a lovely person. But she had this melancholy aura around her. I think she was a masochist. She allowed herself to be exploited. I always asked her why she felt so sorry for herself... why did she allow people around her to torment her? Her own sister used to beat her up. Yet she took it all.

I think she loved suffering. She became addicted to her drinks. She would say she wanted to give up alcohol. But it was the only solace she had. She was a very sweet human being, very caring... and very, very misunderstood.

You want to know why so many of our screen legends married late or married the wrong man or didn't marry at all? I'll tell you why. When you're at



With Saira Banu, Asha Parekh and Jaya Bachchan

the top, you automatically become unapproachable. Since successful heroines don't have the opportunity to meet interesting guys, they marry the first man who proposes to them, the first man who offers them security.

Asha Parekh is happily unmarried. I know her for more than 30 years. I think I'm her best friend. She used to work in Madras a lot at the beginning of her career. We would bump into

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each other quite often. I became friendly with her mother as well. After Asha's mother died, I think I've taken her mother's place in her life. She loves and respects me.

I don't know why I've won the love and support of so many people in the film industry. There's nothing special about me. If I can bring happiness to anyone, I consider myself fortunate.

I have no problems in life and I mean this. All I need are two square meals. I've had a wonderful life. A few disappointments here and there have made the good things even more enjoyable. Even though I'm not rich, I've travelled all over the world. Wined and dined with distinguished people. I may not have money in my bank account, but I have earned people's goodwill. That counts, doesn't it?

My only fiasco in life was my marriage and my efforts to produce a film on my own. Actually, I'd produced *Heera* with my husband. After I left my husband, I produced *Pighalta Aasman* in 1985. I had a terrible time. The problems I had producing one film amounted to problems other producers have making four films.

O riginally, Rajesh Khanna and Shabana Azmi were to play the lead roles. But my director Esmayeel Shroff got them out. Eventually, Shashi Kapoor and Raakhee stepped in without bothering about their fees. Both of them were so helpful.

Then my director started acting nasty with Raakhee. He wouldn't allow her to dub her dialogue. She agreed to dub only if I sat with her in the dubbing studio. When I did that my director threw a tantrum. Eventually I asked him to leave the film.

Unfortunately Raakhee's *Shakti* was released at this time. My distributors backed out, saying she wouldn't be accepted as a heroine any longer.

Shashi Kapoor had put on oodles of weight for *Utsav*. My distributors said he could no longer be accepted as a hero. To add to my woes, my other heroine Rati Agnihotri got married.

But you never know I may just produce another film in the future. I never say never.

As told to Subhash K. Jha

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